

Chapter 4: Maintaining Family Connectedness

Benefits of Working Together

Family Interaction

- Frequency of Family Interaction
- Additional Ways to Support Family Connectedness
- Decreasing or Suspending Family Interaction

Challenges along the Way

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Key Points

Maintaining Family Connectedness

You play a critical role in maintaining connections between children and their birth families. It is essential that you work to create an environment that is supportive of the child and strengthens the relationship between the child and family. The best thing you can provide for a child is support for not only his or her needs but support for the entire family. Remember most children placed in foster care are reunified with their families.

BENEFITS OF WORKING TOGETHER

Permanence for the child can be achieved more quickly when all of the important people in the child's life are working together. Reunification happens faster when there is ongoing contact between the child and his or her family. The child's birth family is more likely to make changes with the support of the foster family. Within a supportive relationship, the birth family may grow to view the foster family as a support system instead of a threat.

In cases where reunification is not possible, families who have learned to trust the foster family can often accept the reality that they cannot care for their children, especially if the foster family is willing to adopt the child.

The person who receives the biggest benefit of everyone working together is the child. Seeing his or her foster parents and birth parents working together or getting along can help the child realize that he or she doesn't need to pick one family over another, and it shows the child that adults can get through difficult situations by communicating and working together.

The following quote from one of Wisconsin's Foster Parents best captures why working with the entire family is so important:

For the longest time, it was impossible for me to comprehend that parents would do these things to their children. But now I know how important it is to put aside personal feelings toward the parents and work on bridging. Before I thought, "Boy they don't pay me enough to have to deal with the parents." I was so wrong. We could have reunited families sooner if I'd understood the importance of working with parents.

FAMILY INTERACTION

Family interaction, what used to be known as visitation, is an important part of a child's adjustment to being in foster care. Family interaction is an opportunity to establish, promote, and maintain relationships between the child and his or her birth parents, siblings, and other extended family members. In addition, family interaction is an opportunity for parents to evaluate their own parenting capacities and gain knowledge of new practices and views about parenting. For case workers, family interaction is also a way to address any safety concerns and support the birth family as they learn to safely care for their children.

Wisconsin policy has shifted from thinking of family visitation as a formal visit in an agency office to family interaction that includes birth families in day-to-day activities with the child such as doctor's appointments, school events, trips to the park, or other events. Regular, constructive interactions help lessen a child's separation anxiety and are critical to successful family reunification. Birth parents that have frequent, regular, and meaningful interactions have the best chance of reunification with their children. If they are not placed in the same foster home, children should also have face-to-face interactions with their siblings at least one time per month, with additional contacts through phone, letters, and email as possible.

Frequency of Family Interaction

Family interaction should occur as frequently and in as many ways as possible. At a minimum, birth parents must have face-to-face contacts with their children on a weekly basis. Children shall have other family interactions, such as letters or phone calls, with their parents at least weekly.

Below are some ideas about how to facilitate regular interactions with a child's family and how to include the birth parents as a part of the child's day-to-day life in foster care.

Regular Events in Child's Life

- ❖ Inform and invite birth parents to school functions, sporting events, and community happenings.
- ❖ Encourage birth parents to attend events without the foster parents present.
- ❖ Take the report card to the parent in sealed envelope. Don't look at it before the parent does.
- ❖ Invite birth parents to a fun outing with the foster family.

Indirect Contact – Phone Calls, Letters

- ❖ Send letters and cards to the parent about the child's progress.
- ❖ Send copies of report cards, school work and art projects.
- ❖ Encourage the child to make cards or crafts to take as gifts to the visit.
- ❖ Make a tape (audio or video) of parents reading a book to the children and play it each evening.

Additional Ways to Support Family Connectedness:

In addition to keeping family interaction consistent and frequent there are other things you can do to help support the child in staying connected with their parents and extended family.

Other Ideas for Supporting Family Connections

- ❖ Try to give the family as much privacy as possible by going on with your normal routine or providing separate space if the interaction occurs in the foster home.
- ❖ Have games and toys available for the birth parent to play with the child.
- ❖ Take pictures of the child and send them to the birth parent.
- ❖ Maintain phone contact between child, parents, and siblings.
- ❖ Call the birth parent when the child is sick or not feeling well.
- ❖ Praise and recognize positive parenting by the birth parent.
- ❖ Discuss shopping and clothing purchases and invite the birth family along.
- ❖ Keep the birth parent informed of the development of the children while in care.

Decreasing or Suspending Family Interaction

Because family interaction is so critical to helping families reconnect, it can only be suspended or prohibited for specific reasons.

According to Wisconsin State Policy:

- ❖ Family interaction can only be prohibited by the agency if a court finds that continued contact is not in the child's best interest.
- ❖ Family interaction **CANNOT** be used as a punishment, reward or threat to a child.
- ❖ Foster parents **CANNOT** prohibit family interaction.
- ❖ Family interaction can be decreased or suspended (under agency supervision) if there is evidence that the contact is contrary to the safety of the children and this information is documented in the case record.

To access the statewide requirements for family interactions in Wisconsin, go to http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/dcf/info/num_memos/2005/2005-06.htm or ask the child's case worker for a copy of the agency's family interaction policy.

CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

At times, problems may occur. You should contact the child's case worker as soon as possible if they have a concern or problem. This may include any events, observations, feelings about something that has occurred, or the child's reactions. Because every situation is different, the child's case worker is in the best position to advise foster parents on how to handle different issues.

It can be very difficult for you to work through the confusion and mixed emotions that some children may have. The best way to address confusing or difficult situations is to answer any questions children have with honesty and respect. You may also want to consider connecting with other foster parents if you are having a hard time with a child's interactions with his or her family.

Problems that May Arise

As with any situation in which an adult is caring for another person's child, problems may occur. When a child has been removed from his or her birth family, there are even more complicating factors and often difficult emotions. Below are some common situations that occur with families involved in the foster care system and ideas for how foster parents can work through them.

Birth family members and foster parents may not get along with one another.

Birth and foster families may have different values, background, culture, parenting style and beliefs, knowledge, age, socioeconomic level, and skills. Talk to the birth parents about their family beliefs, practices, and traditions to learn more about the child's family. Try to give the family as much privacy as possible if family interaction occurs in the foster home.

Family members are unsure of how to relate to the foster family.

Try to make the child's family feel welcome in the foster home. Ask the birth parent for information about the child such as the child's favorite things or one of their favorite times with the child.

Failure for a family member to show up for a visit

Inform the child's case worker as soon as possible. The case worker can then discuss any problems with the family interaction plan with the birth parents. It is the case worker's responsibility to deal with the birth family surrounding failure to participate in interactions with the child.

Family members who are continually late

Document the issues relating to timeliness and report them to the child's case worker. The case worker can discuss problems with the family interaction plan with the birth parents and can discuss the plan with the birth parents and foster parents to modify times and dates of family interactions if needed.

Family members that arrive unannounced

You should have information from the case worker as to what to do if members of a child's family are stopping by the foster home. Each child will have separate court orders regarding family contact.

Family members who arrive in a state of tension, anger, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol

You should have information from the case worker as to what to do if a member of the birth family is intoxicated or threatening. You may need to decide whether to allow the visit. First, assess the threat of danger, potential injury to the child, and your ability to control the situation. Then immediately report the situation to the child's case manager.

Family members who are emotionally, verbally, or physically abusive

You should have information from the case worker as to what to do if a member of the birth family is abusive. Try to stay calm but firm. If the situation does not improve suggest that the visit end and contact the case worker or on-call worker as soon as possible. If the child or someone in close proximity is in imminent danger, intervene in the situation by contacting law enforcement.

Family members who call constantly

Limit calls to a specific time that is both convenient for you and fair to the parents and child. You can work with the child's case manager to effectively communicate and enforce plans for contacting the child.

Family members who may be overwhelmed

Praise and recognize the efforts and positive parenting of the birth family.

Family members who may feel envy and resentment

Assure the birth family that they have a very important and irreplaceable role in the child's life.

Something to consider in closing as you work with children and families:

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

*1) I walk, down the street
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost...I am hopeless
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.*

*2) I walk down the same street
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.*

*3) I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.*

*4) I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.*

5) I walk down another street.

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Chapter 4- Key Points to Remember:

- ❖ You play a critical role in maintaining connections between children and their birth families.
- ❖ The person who receives the biggest benefit of foster parents, birth parents, and case workers working together is the child.
- ❖ Birth parents that have frequent, regular, and meaningful interactions have the best chance of reunification with their children.
- ❖ Try to give the family as much privacy as possible by going on with your normal routine or providing separate space if the interaction occurs in the foster home.
- ❖ Family interaction can only be prohibited by the agency if a court finds that continued contact is not in the child's best interest.
- ❖ You should contact the child's case worker as soon as possible if they have a concern or problem.
- ❖ Assure the birth family that they have a very important and irreplaceable role in the child's life.